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Old Inns and Taverns of New Albany



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SOME OLD INNS

The High Street House in New Albany
A Pioneer Inn Still Standing — The Story of Its Life
and of the People Who Settled New Albany.

(Special to the Indianapolis News in 1900.)

New Albany, Indiana, Nov. 2. — In line with the increasing interest in Americana, from Maine to California, the fact is worthy of emphasis that no State landmarks have greater historic value or are more entitled to attention, distinction and preservation, in print, than our old inns or taverns. Samuel Adams Drake says, "Every old house is a voice speaking to us out of the past". Especially is this true of Indiana's few remaining ancient hostelries. When railways were not yet on Indiana soil, when her cities were mere hamlets of a few log cabins, when the rude wagon or lumbering stage coach was the only connecting link between her scattered assemblies of pioneer life, the tavern — wayside or terminals — was a most potent factor in her civilization; an absorbing nucleus of local interests, and a valuable distributing point for men and affairs.

Among the oldest — perhaps the very oldest — of these Indiana taverns, still offering, as the old advertising phrase ran, "Suitable accommodations for genteel travelers", is a rambling edifice in New Albany, first known as the "Hale Tavern", and then formally christened the "High-Street House". In the old days other New Albany inns had old English titles, such as, "The Black Horse", whose big swinging horse sign stood on a pole at Richard Ransom's tavern, corner Pearl and Spring Sts. or they acquired jocular folk-speech notoriety — Marsh's riverbank tavern being called "The Goose Horn Tavern", and Young's tavern being known as "The Hole-in-the Wall", Hale's Tavern, or the "High Street House", however, held to its original dignity in the public eye and won no familiar opprobrium from the public tongue. The central portion of this inn was erected, as a private dwelling, when New Albany was amere cluster of log cabins.

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SOUTHERN INDIANA SETTLERS

In Horace Greeley's "Estimate of Lincoln" published in the Century Magazine, July, 1891, he states that Lincoln had no educational advantages because "Southern Indiana was mainly settled by poor whites from the South". Of New Albany this allegation is altogether without application. In 1813 New Albany was platted by three educated men — Joel, Nathaniel and Abner Scribner from Morristown, N. J. and from Albany, N. Y. this new home of the Scribners taking its name from the old Albany. Other Eastern families followed the brothers to what was then the "far West" and nearly every old family in this city harks back to ancestors from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Virginia. Patrick Shields, of Virginia, whose name on the list of pioneers who framed the State Constitution of Indiana had taken degrees at William and Mary College, and, there were doubtless others of his kind among Southern Indiana pioneers. These Indiana-Virginians, local history notes were "stuck up" and would not live in log cabins any longer than they had to; so after his return from the battle of Tippecanoe, Patrick Shields erected a good red brick house at Georgetown, out beyond the New Albany hills, whither he had come in 1804 before the Scribners had settled New Albany. In the best room of this house he conducted religious services every Sunday years before Georgetown established a church. This may seem far afield from the "Hale Tavern", but all pioneer history is, or should be, correlative.

THE HALE TAVERN

In 1814 Mrs. Phoebe Scribner, mother of the Scribner brothers, and preceptress of a "young ladies seminary" at Morristown, N. J., with her two daughters, Esther and Ann, came over the Allegheny mountains in a wagon and down the Ohio river by flatboat to join her sons in their New Albany settlement. After living a short time in a log cabin, Mrs. Scribner built as a residence, the central portion of the "Hale Tavern" the second frame dwelling erected in New Albany — the Scribner homestead being

the first. Before these dwellings could be made, a saw-mill had to be built, and a brick yard established. At that period cane brakes covered the lands below New Albany and extended up over the present "Silver Hills", which were then called "Caney Knobs". No fishing-poles now grow on this part of the country.

Enormous trees filled the forests; poplars four and five feet in diameter were accounted of ordinary size. Men who chopped wood in those early forests say the tree-tops and air overhead were alive with wild pigeons.

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

In the back parlor of Mrs. Scribner's home, under the Rev. D. C. Banks, the first Presbyterian church of New Albany was organized in 1817; the total number of members in communion for that year being nine. At this first meeting, communion was administered from two large pewter plates belonging to Mrs. Phoebe Scribner, and "these being of a fine quality were considered very appropriate". What is said to be the first Sunday-school in Indiana was also organized at this time by Mrs. Nathaniel Scribner and Mrs. Catherine Silliman. Mrs. Silliman was a close relative of Prof. Benjamin Silliman, of national reputation. In 1819 Dr. David Morey Hale, son-in-law of Mrs. Phoebe Scribner, erected the two ends of the tavern building as it now stands, and it became the "Hale Tavern" or "High Street House". Main Street at that time ran along a high ridge, sloping south to the river and north toward the hills, and was called "High Street". For so small a village, New Albany, at that date, seems to have abounded in taverns. May 1819, it is recorded that Seth Woodruff, Summers P. Gilman and Basil Hoyte were licensed to keep tavern; in August, 1819, the board of commissioners licensed David M. Hale and R. R. Stewart to "keep tavern in New Albany", and in November 1819, Wyatt P. Tuley was licensed similarly. Tavern rates were then regulated by the local board of commissioners as follows;

Ordered, that the tavern keepers within the county of Floyd observe in their taverns the following rates,

to-wit, for the term of one year: Breakfast-51 ¼ cents; dinner, 37 ½ cents; supper 25 cents; peach or apple brandy and gin 18 ¾ cents per half-pint; whiskey 12 ½ cents per half-pint; wine, per pint 87 ½ cents; spirits per half-pint 37 ½ cents; lodging per night 12 ½ cents; corn or oats per gallon 12 ½ cents; stabling and hay for one horse for a day or night, 37 ½ cents; stabling and hay, one horse for a day and a night, 62 ½ cents.

OLD SCHOOL ELEGANCE

In Dr. David Hale the "Hale tavern" had an unusual and a model landlord. He was an elegant gentleman, of the old school; wearing ruffles in his shirt front, and bearing himself with the dignified and courteous deportment of the ruffle shirt front period. Pittsfield, Mass. was his birthplace. He had served in the war of 1812, and at its close had drifted to the far West. At Vincennes he met Esther Scribner, who was teaching school in that frontier town. The Yankee soldier and the New Jersey girl were mutually attracted, and after their marriage became a part of the Scribner settlement at New Albany.

Esther Scribner Hale is remembered as one of the striking ornaments of the "Hale tavern". She was a lady of culture and of elegant presence—one of the women who adorned a room when she entered it. Under such accomplished management the tavern had well-earned prestige.

New Albany was of rapid growth and soon became the largest town in Indiana. The "Hale tavern" had almost national reputation as the best tavern west of the Allegheny mountains.

Behind its eighty foot front, the house occupied half a block, two long ells stretched down toward the river. Between these were old-time smoke house, to bring forth the good, sweet old-fashioned hams which graced the table; pigpens, cattle sheds and stables were in this inclosure also. Below was a large thrifty vegetable garden for the use and behoof of the inn. Elsewhere in New Albany, too, Dr. Hale cultivated a small farm to supply the need of his establishment.

In due season the Corydon stage line became a thriving feature of pioneer life and the stages and horses were stabled at High Stree House.

It is recalled that Governor Jonathon Jennings always "put up" as a pioneer phrase had it, at Hale's Tavern, in his visits to New Albany from Corydon.

The Stage line between Louisville and St. Louis also always made stops at this tavern; winding up to the door with a merry horn-blast every night and morning. One hundred horses were owned by this stage line before railways were laid; and a stage ran each way over this lone journey every day. At that time a sand-stone slab pavement extended along the front of the tavern — old sandstone door steps deeply worn, so that rain collected in the hollows, still stand at the center door. Wooden hitching racks were at the pave edge; and a huge bell in a heavy frame work clanged out heartily when meals were ready. Many elderly "boys" in New Albany still recall their old-time cry; "Run, run, pig tail done" when the tavern bell was heard. This old bell was on the tavern roof as late as 1860. Twelve dormer windows in the roof, back and front, and five front doors illustrate the ancient architecture of the inn. Two front doors enter the office; the center door enters the halls; a single door enters the tavern parlor, and a large double door enters the dining-room. All these stood wide open in pioneer times, and the guest of that day had not far to seek the entrance and a welcome.

INSIDE THE TAVERN

In the interior the old house is still quaint; as it's latest remodelling in 1850. Much of the lumber work is handhewn, and it is jestingly claimed that the inn is fireproof, so solid still are its heavy poplar and ash beams and timbers. An old-time public washing bench or sink is still in the office, also massive old counter, breast-high, and an odd little parallelogram window, near the door, opens on the hall. The old stairs are broad and low, and the hand rail is of colonial design and simplicity. The-tavern parlor on the street still has its old high back mantel, with a single door corner- cupboard

in one end of the big chimney, and a vast two-story, seven-shelf cupboard at the other end. the single doors have horizontal paneling; but the great double doors of the big dining room — still the largest dining room in New Albany — number sixteen square panels to each door. The tavern contains 52 rooms; and many of these are still quaintly interesting, having low ceilings, small, high windows with panes and tall mantels.

Several interior doors have the little-paned glass sashes and swiss curtains of our great-grandmother's time. The most picturesque portion of the old inn, however, is the great hall in the third story, eighty feet long. It is broken in its extent, by two broad, massive open doorways; and its long vista ends in the gable at the west in a fine old arched window, holding half a hundred panes of glass. Along this old hallway are odd little nooks, made by the old dormer windows; and where the dormer windows appear in the little bedrooms, enchanting little sky-parlors blossom in the imagination. Under one dormer window in the broad hall is an old "angle bench" precisely the cozy corner seat so doted upon by modern artistic home makers; and a similar corner seat, as old as the house — a relic, no doubt, of mistress Phoebe Scribner's daughter Esther's girlhood day — is seen in one of the dormer window bedrooms.

A FAMOUS ROOM

The Scribner back parlor, in which New Albany's church life began, was also, for many years, as the High Street House parlor, the center of much local interest of political character. All men of eminence who visited New Albany in the early times were there entertained. Here the great Daniel Webster was once a guest; and the older residents still recall his ride through the streets in an open carriage, his high, beetling forehead and broad, shaggy gray beaver hat. Andrew Jackson was here during his presidential canvass; also Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison was several times a guest of the inn; and when his grandson, ex-President Benjamin Harrison was making his gubernatorial tour

of Southern Indiana, the local reception committee escorted him to the little back parlor of the old High Street House, that he might be greeted in the room which his grandfather had frequented. In 1840 Zacharay Taylor made the High Street House a political visit; and it is recalled that when he addressed the people standing on the sandstone steps at the middle front door, he was gaily arrayed-wearing a brilliant red vest.

Before the war, when Oliver P. Morton was making addresses through the State, as candidate for Lieutenant-Governor, he made New Albany a visit, and alighted from a fine horse at the door of this old tavern. Mr. A. W. Bentley, of this city, now ninety-one years of age, vividly recalls his appearance at that time, and states that he thought, as Morton then stood, with his hands on his horse's head, awaiting a hostler, he was the finest specimen of manhood he had ever seen.

After Dr. Hale's time the High Street House had various fortunes and various landlords. In the fifties Mr. Jacob Anthony had it in charge. Those were the palmy days of New Albany's boat-building greatness, and the High Street House was full to overflowing with wealthy Southern steamboat captains and their families, the former having come here to personally superintend the construction of their steamboat. In 1853 twenty-three steamboats were built in the New Albany shipyards, and one hundred guests were on the register of this popular house. One long table was spread for them, from end to end of the great dining room, and this is still recalled among imposing features of local greatness.

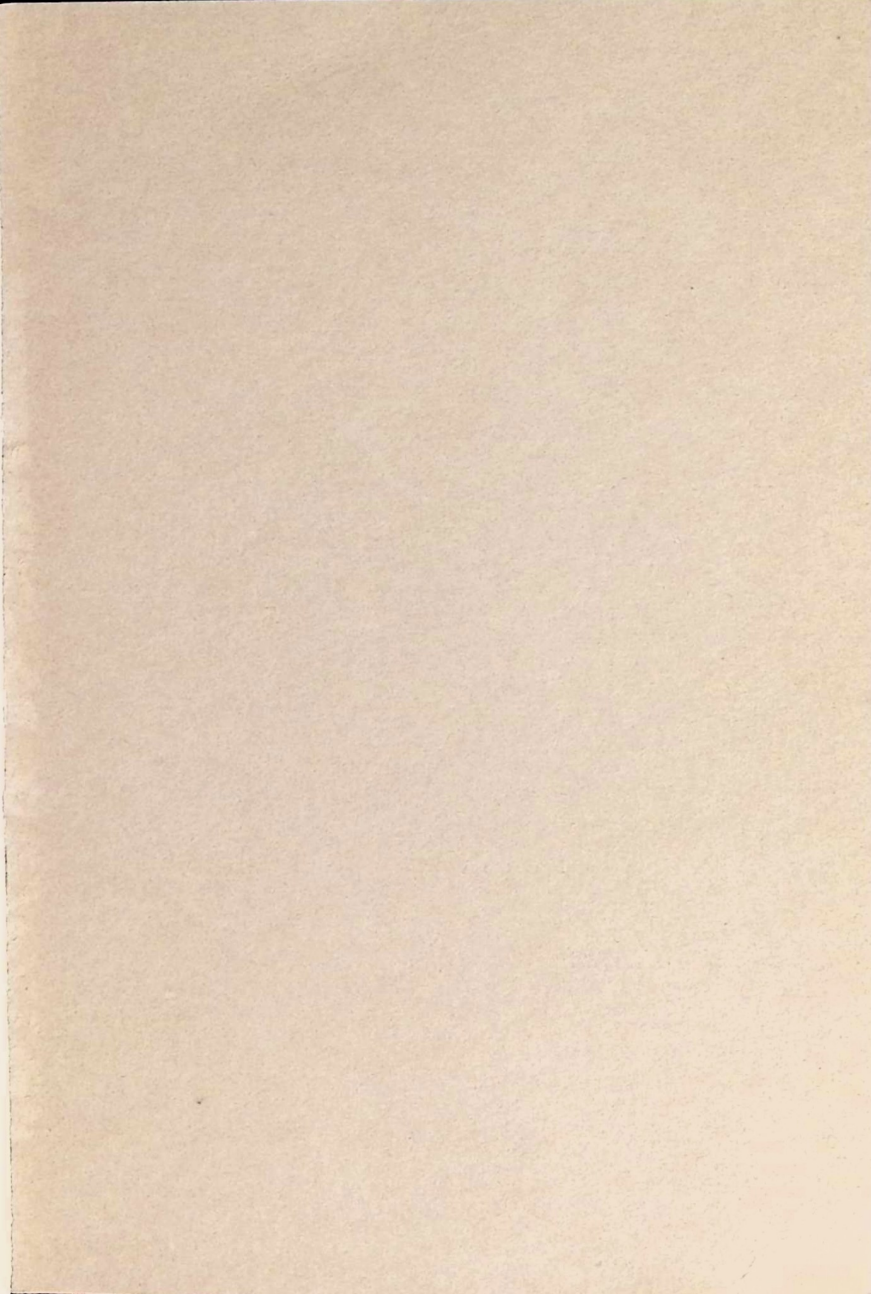
Elegant dressing and gay dances in the big upper halls marked this period, also as a time of great social glory. Among other hosts of the High Street House after 1850 were Nelson Van Deventer, M. Gonzales, Messrs Golding and Wilcoxson and Captain Cox. Captain Cox was an Eastern man whose steamboat was to abandon travel on account of the war. He leased the High Street House for twelve years, set up in fine style with steamboat linen blankets, napery, silver and china; but ran aground in nine months and was superseded by the

present owner, Mr. John McIntosh. Sixty two years ago Mr. McIntosh made his first visit to the "Hale Tavern"—a stage passenger from Hardinsburg, to buy his wedding clothes in New Albany preparatory to his marriage with Miss Sarah Barnett of Marengo. Mr. McIntosh is now eighty three years of age and Mrs. McIntosh is seventy-nine. After thirty-two years occupancy they still have active charge of the present hotel in the one-time Hale's tavern, and are both ably qualified to speak interestingly from experience and hearsay of old times and old tavern days in southern Indiana.

Emma Carleton

November 2nd, 1900.

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